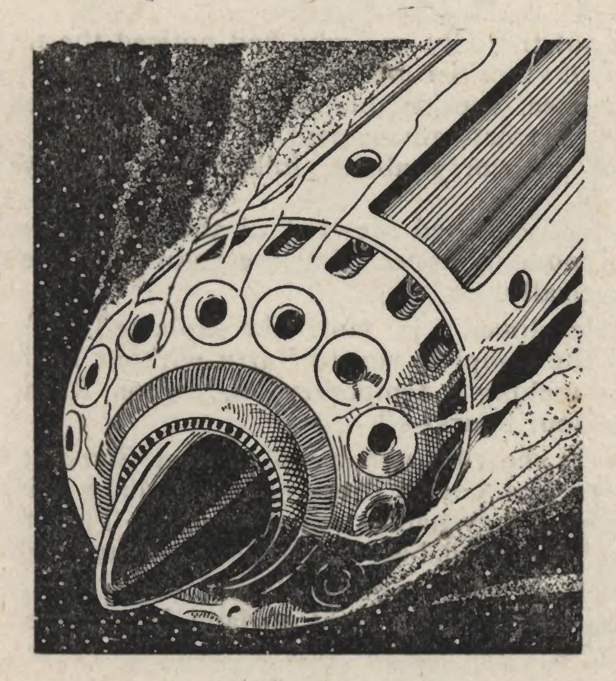
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Valley of Pretenders

By Dennis Clive



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"HELL, that's darned funny!" Mart Latham sat up in his comfortably sprung seat and stared in surprise through the huge window. "Look, we're turning towards Rhea... Rhea of all places!" he whistled blankly.

He was not the only one who had noticed the fact. A general chatter of surprised conversation rose from the passengers in the immense, comfortable lounge. Faces angled towards windows in complete amazement.

"Nothing to worry about, folks. Just keep your seats, please."

A trim, white-coated steward of the giant Earth-Europa space liner suddenly appeared at the main door. He was smiling apologetically.

"We've developed a jet fault," he explained. "It's too risky to attempt the complete run to Earth without having it fixed—so we're making a temporary landing on Rhea. We'll be there about four hours—"

He was cut short by a chorus of protest. Some had appointments, some had wives, some hoped to have wives, others were darn glad they hadn't—and so forth. The steward met the onslaught with his best "customer is always right" smile.

"I am so sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but the Interplanetary Corporation reserves the right to land in an emergency.... Thank you." He departed as silently as he had come.

Mart Latham looked disgustedly out the window again.

"Well, what do you know about that?" he grunted. "Ditched for four hours on the fifth satellite from Saturn with nothing to look at but jungle, and rocks—and things," he finished vaguely.

The girl by his side looked up from a half-doze and revealed a freshly youthful face framed in corn-colored hair.

"Never mind, darling," she consoled him. "It'll give you time to realize how beautiful I am."

"I don't feel like being gallant," Mart growled. "Besides, a guy doesn't tell his wife how beautiful she is after being married to her for five years... Or does he?" he mused.

EDA LATHAM elevated her tip-tilted nose disdainfully. "Noted chemist on holiday from Europa trade satellite makes analysis of matrimony," she sniffed. "O.K., be high hat if you want to!"

"Rhea," Mart murmured, hardly listening to her, his gray eyes fixed on the 1500-mile diameter moon of Saturn as the vast space liner curved around towards it. "Y'know, I've often wondered what Rhea has on it. Titan's pretty well known, of course, but the other smaller moons, Rhea among them, hasn't had much to say for itself. Inhabitants of sorts, I understand; even an atmosphere. But devilish hot."

"Naturally, being near Saturn," Eda said, regarding him with level blue eyes. "Let me think now... Rhea is 337,000 miles from the primary. Right?"

"Right!" Mart agreed laconically. "Revolves in relation to the Sun at the speed of 4 days, 12 hours, and 25 minutes. Gravitation somewhat less than that of Earth's moon. Atmosphere breathable, but only to a height of 1500 feet. Satisfied? —or shall I get you a guide book?"

The girl didn't answer. She was watching the little moon rising up to meet the ship. Exhaust sparks, prevented from igniting the vegetation below by reason of subsidiary foam nozzles, spouted from the underjets. Saturn, vast and magnificent with its planetoidial rings, dominated all space. A partly molten, partly solid, but at all times rather grim, world.

Further in the distance beyond the rings moved the trading moon of Titan, and at varied intervals the but little explored other moons of Hyperion, Japetus and Phoebe...

Eda started to speak as the ship began to settle down carefully over a waste of sprawling green jungle; then she stopped and turned a little as a voice cut above hers. It was a slow voice, sonorously British, steeped in the toneless impartiality of the law courts.

"...but, m'lud, I would bring to your learned notice the case of Simmons-v-Simmons in 2415, exactly five years ago. There, the plaintiff alleged—"

"I am not interested, Sir Basil! Not interested in the least."

Sir Basil Emmot, world and space renowned interplanetary Counsel of British law, mopped a bald head and blinked protruding, bovine eyes. Next to him, Judge Asa Walbrook — thin and wizened as a disinterred corpse, and about as attractive — looked at him sourly. Nobody spoke. Nobody dared to. Judge Walbrook had captured and condemned more criminals in his career than any other man alive; even now he was heading earthwards to preside over the trial of Nick Andrews, long evasive spacial filibuster.

"Cheery looking old dear, isn't he?" Eda murmured, turning back to Mart. "That face of his would make any lemon jealous."

She stopped again as the ship suddenly jolted slightly and became still. The throbbing of the tremendous rocket engines ceased; the vessel lay in the half-shade of towering trees that stretched upwards to surprising heights against the slight gravity. The multiple lights of Saturn and the moons filled the outside jungle with a curiously ghostly white tinge, not unlike indirect floodlighting.

The steward appeared again. "If you wish to take exercise, ladies and gentlemen, you are at liberty to do so. But you are warned not to move more than two hundred yards from the ship. We are by no means sure of what this moon contains. If you go any further you do so at your own risk. Kindly leave your names with the purser as you go out, so a complete check of passengers may be made before we start again. We have four hours' wait."

He disappeared actively, and Mart got to his feet. Languidly he zipped up his shoes. They were special shoes, worn by every space traveler — steel-soled to hold firmly to the attractive gravity-compensator plates in the floor. Nor were they any too comfortable...

"Guess we might as well have a look at Rhea," he murmured. "How about you, Eda?"

"Naturally!" She fixed her own shoes and patted her hair. Behind her, Judge Walbrook rose up with a face of vinegar, Emmot beside him.

"I have always felt, Sir Basil, that your learned talents are better exercised in unconfined surroundings," Walbrook observed, chopping his words with vicious economy. "We can continue this discussion on Simpson-v-Simpson outside."

"Simmons-v-Simmons, I assure you," the Counsel corrected hotly, tugging out his pipe and filling it.

"Don't be impudent! And kindly refrain from lighting that archaic incinerator in here, too! Come!"

Mart stared after them, grinning. "That Simmons-v-Simmons case must be a honey," he said seriously. "Be glad you married a chemist and not a judge . . ."

HE TOOK the girl's arm and headed from the lounge into the main hall. Men and women were queued up before the purser's desk . . . Then in a few minutes Mart found himself outside the airlock on Rhea's soft, vegetation-smothered surface. Immediately a sense of amazing lightness buoyed him up. Years on Europa, however, with its slight attraction, had made him — and Eda too — practiced in the art of counterbalancing themselves.

"Pretty dry here," Eda remarked, stirring the tindery stuff at her feet. "The other satellites are wet by comparison."

"Less humidity here," Mart observed.

For a moment or two they both stood accustoming themselves, breathing the somewhat dry but tolerable atmosphere, conscious too of sweltering, burning warmth.

The people broke up into parties, wandered around the giant liner, peered into the corners of the clearing. The sound of the ship's mechanics began to echo vigorously — but above them came a fading, occasional didactic reference to "Simmons-v-Simmons" as Walbrook and Emmot wandered off to the far side of the clearing, oblivious to all warnings to stay near the ship.

"Well, what now?" Eda asked, dabbing her face languidly. "Do we stick around, or look around?"

Mart answered her by strolling towards the wall of jungle. Through the trees, the remarkably near horizon was visible, giving the odd effect of the jungle suddenly sloping away almost in sheerness.

"Mart, what exactly is that?" asked the girl suddenly, when they reached the jungle's first trees, and she pointed to a quivering rim of pale fire just visible over the near horizon. In some strange way it resembled a pale edition of the Earthly Northern Lights.

Mart shrugged. "No idea — and we can't risk going too far to find out. Pity! You know, I'd like to come here some day and —" He broke off. sniffing hard. "Smell something?" he asked sharply.

Eda elevated her nose, then looked surprised. "I believe I do! Burning wood . . . Maybe old Lemon Pan and the Counsel

have built themselves a fire, seeing it's only one hundred and thirty in the shade—"

"Look!" Mart interrupted her, pointing, and she gave a startled gasp at a vision of sooty smoke rising into the air perhaps a quarter of a mile distant.

'It's a fire all right," Mart went on tensely. "And if this stuff gets ablaze—Holy Smoke! We've got to warn them back at the ship..."

But there was no need for that. The officers of the vessel, conducting the mechanics' operations, had already seen the smoke and were issuing quick orders to the crew to fetch the powerful fire extinguishers.

"Inside, everybody!" roared the chief steward, through his wrist-microphone. "We can't afford to take chances."

He's right there," Mart muttered, catching the girl's arm. "We'd better—"

"Help!"

It wasn't a very audible call; in fact it would probably have missed being heard altogether had not Mart and Eda been at that particular part of the clearing. They turned sharply, startled a,nd even as they did so it came again.

"It's coming from somewhere near that smoke column!" Eda cried.

Mart glanced back towards the ship. Nobody else seemed to have heard the cry: they were all too busy dashing for the ship in case the fire developed into a genuine conflagration.

"We've got to help," he stated briefly. "You go back to the ship and—"

"Rats!" Eda cut in tersely. "I married you until death do us part. This may be the break I'm waiting for..."

Without waiting, she turned and headed into the jungle with Mart immediately behind her. With the lesser gravity to aid them they progressed in immense leaps, floating across considerable distances, coughing as the smoke grew denser and surged into their lungs.

"Hey! Where are you?" Mart yelled, pausing a moment.

"Here! Here! Quick—!"

"It's Lemon Pan all right," Eda gasped, then she jumped back as the foliage of a nearby tree began to sizzle and wither in a blighting shaft of flame shooting up its length. All the groundwork of a forest fire was laid.

THE SMOKE was a fog now, but the two blundered forward again, to come suddenly on Judge Walbrook and Emmot standing in the middle of a little clearing, tugging — oddly enough — at their own legs, while around them the flames of burning vegetation were spurting dangerously close.

"Keep away!" Emmot cried, as Mart prepared to leap forward. "You'll be as bad as we are if you come here. We're — stuck!" he wailed dismally.

"But — but you can't be!" Mart yelled. "You're not in a bog; you're on solid ground. What sort of a game is this? Come on!"

Ignoring the warning he jumped forward, Eda beside him, but the moment they landed they felt themselves gripped by something of viselike power. They couldn't move one foot beyond the other.

"You see?" Walbrook bleated, more crinkled than ever now he was alarmed. "This is the fault of my learned friend. I told him not to scatter his pipe ashes in the vegetation — " He broke off with a yelp as a crackling runner of fire spat towards him.

Mart coughed violently and tugged at his feet. It was useless; he was rooted. Then he started suddenly as Eda came to his side in her stockinged feet. Her shoes lay behind her, zipped wide open.

"Take your shoes off, smart guys!" she suggested tartly. "This stuff's magnetized, or something — holds the steel soles of our shoes. You two do the same." She gazed witheringly at the best brains in British law, then helped to rip open the zippers.

"But this is perfectly preposterous!" Sir Basil cried, stumbling free of the danger area. "I cannot reconcile the fact that — "

"Never mind reconciling facts," the girl said practically. "We've got to head back to the ship before we're cut off — If we can!" she finished in dismay. "Look, Mart!"

She jabbed an arm at the pouring flood of choking smoke, the crackling advance of flames. The way back was ruthlessly cut off by a solid, raging wall.

But Mart wasn't looking. He was on his knees staring at the slacky substance whereon the four pairs of shoes were still immovably riveted.

"Say, this stuff is magnetite!" he exclaimed in astonishment, glancing up. "Natural lodestone — like the Swedish deposits on Earth. Magnetic oxide of iron.

"So what?" demanded Eda impatiently. "Take a look at the fire."

He sprang up from his futile efforts to dislodge the shoes, stumbled backwards and cursed as a sharp bramble stabbed his besocked feet. In dismay he stared at the beating, torrid wall of flame moving inwards.

"Come on — we've got to travel," he panted. "That way ..."

Stumbling helplessly he led the way to the opposite side of the clearing with Eda and the legal men picking their way behind him.

CHAPTER II

ONLY when the holocaust was some two hundred yards behind them did they stop.

"Now what?" Eda demanded, wiping her smutty, greasy face. "How do we get back to the ship? We're heading away from it all the time. Besides, this jungle is no place to hike around without shoes."

"What do you suggest? — that we walk through the fire like a collection of Hindu fakirs?" Mart asked tartly. "We've got to keep moving until it dies down, or the ship's crew extinguishes it. Come on — it's catching up again."

He began to resume the advance, but Walbrook caught his arm.

"Listen to me, young man!" he panted. "Back on the Earth I have to preside over the case of Andrews-v-Interplanetary, and it is quite unthinkable that my learned colleague and I — "

"Forget your briefs and follow me," Mart snapped out. "That fire's gaining ... "

Onrushing flame made further argument impossible. Floundering wildly in the slight gravity, stabbed by barbs and vicious thorned roots, the quartet blundered on, they knew not where, all sense of direction hopelessly at sea, the smoke of the forest fire formed into a dense, imprenetrable fog behind them.

They became aware of other things too — the bellowing of enigmatic beasts, the shriek of unknown birds, all stampeded by the conflagration. Here and there through the rifts were glimpses of incredible objects plunging and plowing through the undergrowth.

"Looks like we loosed some kind of zoo around here," Eda said breathlessly, rubbing her gashed feet painfully. "And if

you, my learned friend," she went on bitterly, glaring at Sir Basil, "had taken care where you parked your pipe ash, this wouldn't have happened. Of all the darned crazy things to do! Here!"

The Counsel's veiny brown eyes protruded nauseatingly.

"But, my dear young lady — "

"Don't 'dear young lady' me! You ought to start a Nicotine Abolition Act with that profound brain of yours — Gosh, Mart, what's that?" Eda finished with a scream, and the others looked up in time to see a vast pair of saucer eyes staring at them molevolently from a hundred-foot high body.

"Some sort of dinosaur," Mart panted. "Can't try conclusions with that brute. This way — "

He swung off to the right, clutching the girl's arm. Together they vaulted the nearest five-foot high row of bushes, but they did not strike solid ground beyond. Instead they found themselves in the midst of warm, fast-moving water, struggling desperately amidst a jammed, screaming mass of animals, none of which resembled anything Earthly.

Two splashes from the rear announced that Judge and Counsel had also landed. Walbrook rose up screaming words not entirely legal and finally choked out that he couldn't swim.

"But I can, m'lud," Emmot gaspingly assured him. "Leave everything to me."

He clutched the older man tightly and struck out towards Mart and Eda. His bald head looked like an emerald bladder with scum draped round it.

"Most belittling," he groaned, as he came level. "The dignity of the law, upheld by — "

"Watch yourself!" Mart interrupted him, gaze darting around him at the fighting creatures. "A flick from one of those supertails and it'll be curtains. Take it easy; the flow'll carry us along."

"Curtains?" wheezed Walbrook, smothered in mud, scum, and fury. "Curtains? Confound you, sir, how are window adornments applicable to our present position?"

Emmot ejected a mouthful of filthy water. "Americanism, m'lud," he gurgled to explain, "implying, as I understand it, a rather sudden cessation of life — symbolical, to wit, with the descent of a curtain upon a stage act, m'lud, whereby — "

"Oh, shut up!" yelled Mart. "This is no law court — Look out there!"

HE DUCKED suddenly, forced Eda down, too. A mighty object, mad with fright and twice the size of a crocodile, breathed its last as its abdomen was transfixed by a vicious spire of dead tree stump projecting from the water. With bursting lungs the quartet emerged from the froth and foam of the death struggle.

"This is all most irregular—" Walbrook began to bleat, but Mart yelled above him:

"Say, that carcass wouldn't make a bad raft! The lesser gravity will help it to float, too. Give me a hand with it. I don't think these other creatures will attack us; they're too concerned for their own safety."

He struck out vigorously and clutched the object's scaly body with both hands. It rolled over in a tumult of water. With some effort, which somehow reminded him of riding a bladder-horse in a swimming pool, Mart scrambled onto the broad back. Wedging himself as well as possible, he held down his hand, dragged the girl up with ease against the lesser gravity. Floundering crazily, Walbrook and Emmot followed suit.

"And now?" the Judge panted, very wet and monkeylike, as they began to drift downstream amidst the bubble and smother of stampeded animals.

Mart shrugged his shoulders. "I'm no fortune teller, judge. All we can do is go where this takes us. We're safe enough from fire here, anyway. The space liner crew will douse it with their high-power apparatus, anyway...At the moment our lives are still our own."

"But for how long?" groaned Sir Basil, wiping his taut, scummy head. "Oh, woe is me! An unknown world, an unknown river—drifting further and further away from the ship...And did you notice the water was quite warm?" he finished with sudden brightness.

"Naturally, on a world so near to Saturn," panted Walbrook. "Where are your finer powers of perception, Sir Basil?"

"Rhea's nearness to Saturn doesn't altogether explain such warm water," Mart murmured. "I'm inclined to suspect volcanic forces."

"That's right; be cheerful!" snapped Eda, tossing back her damp hair. "Next thing you'll be telling us is that we're drifting into a boiling whirlpool or something. If so, I'm heading for the bank. I never did like lobster."

Mart didn't answer her, and for a moment the party was

silent. Then a bend in the river brought into view that strange aurora display the girl had pointed out a little while before — a quivering band of white, but augmented now by streaks of amber and lilac arcing across the purply-blue sky.

"Wish I could figure out what that is," Mart mused. "Seems to be centered over Rhea's North Magnetic pole. High electrical energy of some kind — maybe connected somehow with that natural lodestone area we found . . ."

He stared up at titanic Saturn flooding his warmth and light down on this fantastic little satellite, then suddenly he looked ahead again as there came to his ears the unmistakable sound of a dim, booming roar.

For the first time he noticed that the animals in the river were battling aside, struggling towards the silent, weird masses of the jungle on either bank. There was no danger of fire here; the danger area was far behind.

"Mart, what is that noise " Eda demanded suddenly, seizing his arm. "It's funny, but — but I remember that — Niagara sounded like that from a distance . . . Remember? Our honeymoon?"

"It's a waterfall!" cried Walbrook hoarsely, clutching his skimpy gray hair. "It's a waterfall, I tell you!" He danced perilously on the carcass. "Do something! Don't you realize that my life is valuable? my — "

"Oh, shut up!" Mart growled. "You're no more valuable than we are . . ." He broke off, studying the accelerated speed of the water. "If it is a waterfall we're going right over it," he breathed. "We couldn't swim to the bank against this current in any case. The animals knew what was ahead; they got free in time. River's clear of 'em . . . Looks like we're going places."

Sir Basil gave a groan of despair. "And me with the case of Andrews-v-Interplanetary on hand! My brief — everything — for nothing!" His pop-eyes stared down the river, much as a cow regards a cloudbank.

THE others stared with him, nor was it very long before another bend of the river brought into sight the filmy mist that hangs eternally over plunging waters. Backed by the rainbow hues of the distant aurora, the effect was both beautiful and extraordinary.

The carcass quickened speed. Mart turned to the legal men, clutching Eda to him.

"It's a waterfall, all right — tidy size too, if the din and mist

is any guide. The only thing that can save us is the lesser gravitation. As we go over, jump outward—outward for your lives... You'll miss the main water impact that way."

He tensed himself as he spoke, keeping his balance with difficulty as the carcass bobbed up and down with ever increasing speed.

"This is most disturbing," moaned Walbrook; then he turned a ripely jaundiced eye on Emmot. "Sir Basil, I shall look to you for assistance."

"Willingly, m'lud—but I would bring to your learned notice that I am not proficient in the art of acrobatics."

"Mart, suppose—" whispered Eda hopelessly; but he only tightened his hold.

"Take it easy, Eda. We've taken the hurdles so far and we'll take this one—somehow... Uh-uh! We're off now—"

The carcass suddenly jolted forward, so violently that the four were nearly pitched off. As they rocked and swayed they felt it hurtle towards the creaming cataract ahead. Beyond, they had a transient glimpse of the river's continuation through a deeply-wooded valley, to the left of which was a blunted, sullenly smoking volcano.

"Jump for your life!" Mart screamed suddenly, and simultaneously hurled himself outwards into space with all his power.

The effort of his jump dislodged Eda from him; in the lesser gravity she went soaring absurdly away from him, turning slow somersaults. To the rear Emmot and Walbrook rose up, looking curiously like effigies on Independence Day.

Twirling through the air Mart got a brief glimpse of the waterfall. It was at least 200 feet high... He began to drop towards the river below with ever increasing speed—automatically straightening his body for a dive. Eda was falling too, yards away... He struck water—but struck something else as well that burst the universe into soundless white fire...

CHAPTER III

MART struggled back to consciousness, to the awareness of a throbbing head and murmuring voices. He opened his eyes to the full-bodied glare of Saturn streaming down upon him with its feverish warmth. The ground underneath him was stony and warm; several feet away the river raced past.

"Mart—! Oh, Mart, thank Heaven!" It was Eda suddenly

beside him, her clothes nearly dry now in the blighting heat, her hands holding his head thankfully.

"O.K., don't strangle me," he mumbled, emerging from the clinch. "I'm all right now . . . But say, what happened?"

"You caught yourself a glancing blow on a submerged rock. No damage done, thank goodness. We managed to pull you out."

"Oh . . . " Mart turned and caught sight of Emmot and Walbrook sitting a little distance off, looking behind them in blank astonishment. Mart turned again and winced as his head swam.

"Say, what — what the — ?" he began blankly, and Eda cut in quickly:

"They've been waiting for you to recover," she explained anxiously. "They talk — talk English!"

"Th-the devil they do!" he stammered back, and stared in amazement at a group of twenty men and women, all of them but scantily attired, practically Earthly in general development save that the lesser gravity had given them shorter stature and more highly efficient biceps. All the men were white bearded.

Their faces were strikingly childlike and docile, differing but little from good tempered Earth boys and girls of some ten years of age. The only oddity lay in the slit, catlike pupils of their innocent misty blue eyes — pupils which visibly dilated and contracted under the changing lights of Saturn and the various moons.

Beyond them stood a rather makeshift city of dried mud; yet remarkably enough it looked as though it was meant to resemble modern New York — a miniature version of it in mud flung here amidst the wilds of Rhea. There were recognizable edifices, even streets, but there was a complete lack of unity and careful planning.

Behind it was again the evidence of that enigmatic, multicolored aurora, while to the right, lifting to a height of some 800 feet, and smoking sullenly, stood a squat but none-the-less deadly volcano . . .

Mart scrambled to his feet at last with his eyes on the men's beards.

"So this is where Santa Claus hails from," he muttered. "Methinks this is where we have plenty palaver, eh, squaw?" He grinned at Eda, then with upraised hand went slowly forward.

"Here's looking at you!" he cried, halting before the foremost man.

"Mud in your eye," responded the four-foot leader gravely, and bowed profoundly so that his beard eclipsed his narrow waistline. Then, straightening up and looking Mart full in the eye, he asked politely, "Did you brush your teeth this morning?"

"Huh?" Mart blinked in astonishment, was hardly aware that Eda, Walbrook, and Emmot had come silently up behind him.

"I speak to you by courtesy of the people of Malinjah," the man went on. "We, the Malinjahs, offer you a free sample of our excellent hospitality. Come at once, or write at once, as you will..."

Mart shook himself, thumped his forehead. "No doubt about it," he muttered. "That slug on the head has made me daffy. Why, this guy talks like a radio television announcer handing out blah...There ain't no such animal! Who'd you say you are?" he asked abruptly, looking up again.

"The Malinjahs. I am Ansid Rawl, leader of my people's network, complete with hookups."

"We'll skip the hookups. How'd you come to be here? How did you learn English?'

For answer Rawl turned and pointed towards the aurora. "Knowledge is cheap when it is free," he said poetically. "Write now for my prospectus. Send no money."

Eda started to snicker at the astounded expression on Mart's face. Even Walbrook's withered mouth creased painfully at the corners. Emmot's eyes had nearly parted company with his face.

"Don't you get it, Mart?" the girl gasped at last, holding her sides. "Some — somehow these people have a means of hooking onto Earthly television broadcasts; the radio part at any rate. Very probably American broadcasts, since they're the most widely distributed and work on the strongest power. That's where they've picked up the language and they use advertisement slogans and bits and pieces out of plays, sketches and political blurbs to talk with. Gosh, who'd have thought it!"

"I don't believe it," Mart stated stubbornly. "There's no signs of radio aerials in that city or theirs..." He stopped, trying to collect his thoughts, and the quaint people looked gravely at him with their big, slumbrous blue eyes and cat-like pupils.

"We're from the Earth — third planet out from the Sun," he hesitated. "We're — er — We're trapped. Want food. We are friends."

"You believe in democracy?" Rawl asked surprisingly.

"Eh? Yeah, sure we do... But what's that to do with it?"

"If you did not we would declare a state of war. Democracy for the democrats. Non-party; unilateral. That's us."

"War? With whom?"

"Anybody," Rawl said complacently. "So long as we are right."

MART began to gesticulate, finally blurted out, "Be damned to the politics! What about a bite to eat?"

"Eat with pleasure — fear of pain afterwards positively banished! This way..."

Turning suddenly, Rawl led the way up the shingle towards the Saturn-lit city. Rubbing his bruised head Mart began to follow, Eda at his side.

"Tell me, young man, what do you imagine is the matter with these people?" asked Walbrook, coming level. "In a way, I am — ah reminded of the case of Munro-v-Munro, wherein the plaintiff complained that her husband developed a mania for writing for advertised samples... Very similar, eh, Sir Basil?"

"Very similar, m'lud. Clearly these people are strongly influenced by the advertisements of the time... You're a chemist, Mr. Latham. Can you account for it?"

"You've got me there — up to now," Mart confessed. "They strike me as being really quite childlike, with little initiative of their own. Take this city we're coming to. It's not built by their own ingenuity; it's taken from descriptions they've heard over innumerable radio broadcasts. Note the lack of unity, showing minds that are only half-developed in the matter of self-government and control. Rawl said that the aurora caused him to know English —" Mart broke off and stared at the strange display. "North magnetic Polar Lights all right," he breathed. "I just wonder how — "

"Gosh, what a smell!" Eda interrupted him, pinching her tilted nose. "Who's opened the sewers around here?"

"Like — like rotten eggs," Sir Basil observed, and seemed ashamed of his brief lapse from dignity.

"There's the source of it," Mart remarked, nodding towards

the volcano. "H2S gas — better known as sulphretted hydrogen — Say, that gives me an idea!"

"Wad?" Eda asked nasally, still clutching her nose. "How der dooce do dese folks live arou'd here wid dat udhody odor blowi'g arou'd?"

"That's just it. Maybe they don't smell it."

"Boy, dey'd wad sub code in de dose dot to smell dat!"

"No, I mean maybe some other sense is developed instead. It might be. For instance, animals have sense of smell developed above sense of eyesight. With humans, sight comes first, hearing second, and smell last. Some even have no sense of smell."

"So whad?"

"I dunno; 'cept that perhaps these folks have a sense we don't know about which compensates them for lack of smell."

"I'd give all I've godt to loose my sedse of smell right dow — "

Eda broke off and released her nose as Rawl pointed to the nearest building of the mud city. With a beaming smile and a good deal of ceremony, surrounded by his silent people, he led the way into it. To the deepening amazement of the Earthlings, it was furnished in a style that was crudely terrestrial. There were chairs and tables in the center of a vast room that filled the entire length of the building. There were no other floors: the ceiling went up to an amazing height.

"More evidences of lack of brains," Mart commented. "They don't seem to realize that Earthly buildings have several floors and not only one ground floor... Guess they're just playing at being civilized, like kids play at shop. They're just — well, just Pretenders."

Inside this room, lighted by naturally ignited volcanic gas spouting from crudely designed jets on the stone walls, the odor of sulphretted hydrogen had diminished considerably. The light of Saturn cast silver oblongs on the floor...

Rawl motioned to the chairs. "If you want food, we have it — and then some," he said affably.

TURNING aside he clapped his hands sharply, spoke for the first time in an unknown language. It was the signal for his childish, passive followers to spring into action. They vanished into unknown recesses of the slipshod building and returned bearing armfuls of fruit, presumably jungle products.

"Are we expected to eat these — these overgrown bananas?" demanded Walbrook, as they were laid on the table.

"Most irregular, m'lud, but without alternative," Emmot murmured, then he looked at Mart questioningly.

"O.K.," Mart announced, sampling one. "They're safe enough. Overgrown plantains, or something. Not poisonous to our constitution, anyhow."

Rawl watched in blase contentment as the four began to appease their hunger, sharpened by their experiences. One of the women slipped outside and returned shortly afterwards with four garlands of livid-hued flowers. With a little cry of girlish delight, she placed one around Sir Basil's perfectly bald head.

"Really, young woman, I protest!" he shouted, looking up. "And at my age— !"

"Irrelevant and immaterial," grinned Mart, looking at him critically. "But you'd better not take it off. These folks have evidently got you down as a sort of god, or something — Hey, what the — " He broke off in dismay as soft white arms passed against his ears and he found himself similarly adorned.

Eda looked remarkably pretty with hers — but Judge Walbrook looked about as attractive as a pig with a lemon between its teeth.

"Most irregular!" he fumed, crinkling with passion. "I refuse to wear it!"

"You'd better," Mart counselled quickly, glancing up. "Our friend Aniseed Ball has his eye on you . . . Keep your shirt on."

"I assure you," Walbrook said, with measured acidity, "that I have no intention of taking my shirt off."

"Oh, skip it," Mart groaned. "Why don't you learn English?"

Rawl came forward from the ranks of his smiling, highly delighted people.

"I bring you a message," he stated, waving his small arm. "We wait for the appointed ones: they who will show us peace. You are the appointed ones."

"Oh, but we're not," Mart protested, jumping up. "You're talking about things religious, Rawl; things you've heard over the radio. Some religious denominations wait for the appointed ones, yes — but that's not us. We've got to leave here. We have a ship waiting for us."

Rawl shook his head steadily and smiled. "We have waited long. We shall honor and cherish so long as you all shall live."

"You are here . . . on a journey which knows no returning," Rawl observed calmly.

"That's — that's Shakespeare," Eda said quickly. "An' maybe he means it, Mart. There is no way back over that waterfall . . ."

"Hell!" Mart said helplessly, and all sat looking at each other, too concerned to notice how absurd they all looked with their garlands — all save Eda. Emmot was looking at her with a pop-eyed expression that might have either been fascinated appreciation or incipient cardiac.

CHAPTER IV

AFTER a time Rawl and his people began to hum, in not unmusical voices, watching the four intently as they did so. At first it did not occur to Mart what they were chanting, then he suddenly leaped up.

"Listen to 'em!" he shouted. "That song is 'I'll Buy Me a Robot' — the latest American craze song! They can only have contacted that by direct radio . . ." He swung around to Rawl. "Look here, where is your radio receiver?" he demanded.

Rawl shrugged, tapped his head. "Why travel far when it comes to your door?" he asked, then pointed again towards the far end of the room. It was obvious he meant the aurora, hidden from sight now, of course.

Mart stared perplexedly, then suddenly Eda cried, "Listen, Mart, is it possible that these folks are natural radio receivers? They haven't the brains to build apparatus; they're only like kids."

"Say, I believe you've got something there, Eda. Their lack of a sense of smell, for instance, might be compensated for by another unknown sense. Here's to trying, anyhow . . . Rawl, can you hear radio waves?"

"All-wave receiver given free," he said in gratification, thudding his white-haired head again.

"It is inside his brain!" Eda cried. "What there is of his brain, that is."

"But how — ?" Mart kicked his chair back and began to pace the room, thinking. "Short-wave radio waves do penetrate this far, of course, especially the ones linked with television. They travel as far from Earth as Pluto. But — Good Lord!" he broke off with a gasp. "I begin to get it now — the connection between the aurora and this radio reception. This

planet is naturally highly magnetic; we know that by discovering that lodestone area back in the forest. There may be thousands of 'em knocking around different parts of Rhea, particularly at the poles."

"So long as —" Mart gulped, stared, then sat down with a thud. He spread his hands helplessly. "That's the marriage service you're mangling!" he yelled. "And it's time this sort of foolery came to an end. We can't stop here."

"Well?" Eda questioned, and the people themselves moved closer to hear Mart's halting, thoughtful exposition.

"Is there any reason," he deliberated, "why the free electrons of short radio waves cannot be caught by Rhea's lines of magnetic force spiraling around its magnetic poles? It's a highly magnetized satellite for one thing; it doesn't spin too fast, of course, but quite fast enough to form itself into a planetary dynamo and collect radio waves and redistribute them — Gosh, yes! That would account for the weird electrical display at the pole. Probably the same thing happens at the other pole, too. Not only trapped radio wave electrons, but electric radiations of various sorts have full play. This planet has such a high magnetization it captures them pretty freely, both from outer space and Saturn's own emanations."

"That may be right," Eda admitted, thinking, "but how do you account for these folks being able to hear them?"

"Just a minute," Mart said, and turning to the table he picked up the skin of one of the plantain fruits. Gently he folded it and rubbed it together.

"Rawl, what does that sound like to you?" he asked quickly.

"Visit Niagara Falls for your honeymoon," Rawl smiled back — and Mart gave a yelp, slammed the peel emphatically back on the table.

"There you are! To us that sounded like a faint, slippy sort of noise. To him it sounds like the din of Niagara. You get it? The hearing perception of these people is way ahead of ours. Human ear limit is 10-12 watt power, and that's mighty low. Animals a bit higher. These people are above our audible frequency."

"Maybe," Eda mused, "but how does that connect up with them hearing radio waves — electronic waves? Those aren't audible anyway; they're electrical."

"I know that, sweetheart! Point is, their brains are adapted differently than ours. If they can hear inaudible sounds and magnify them as much as they do, it logically indicates that they can also receive electrical waves and interpret them."

"But how?"

"How the devil should I know?" Mart snorted exasperatedly. "Give me some cooperation, can't you? When a stream of electrons changes its course in, say, the Sun, it produces the sensation of light in our brains, via our eyes. Well, what happens inside our brains to transform electron agitation into light? We don't know; nobody does. It's a thought mutation; a cellular response as impossible to describe as explaining a color to a blind man."

EDA looked about her at the child-like faces and shrugged her slim shoulders.

"Can you beat it?" she asked at last. "Kids with radio-receiver minds in a mud city on a cock-eyed moon! And I thought I knew all the answers about space and its contents."

"Personally," said Walbrook sadly, fingering his garland, "I am not in the least interested in space or vulgar radio... I really must insist we find our way back to the ship. I have a case to judge."

"You've said something there," Mart assented grimly. "We have got to take a chance..." He swung around on the smiling Rawl.

"Listen, Rawl, there must be another way through the jungle without climbing two hundred feet of sheer cliff," he insisted. "A pass, or something. What about it?"

Rawl shrugged; his people giggled among themselves, as amused as children at the Earthlings' anxiety. It was perfectly plain that their strange minds saw no seriousness in the situation.

"Happy the man, whatever his lot, is he who's content with whatever he's got," Rawl observed with a certain fatalism, and folded his arms to verify his belief.

Mart groaned and clutched his hair. "Listen to him!" he muttered bitterly. "That statement's plain enough — there is no way, or if there is these walking radio receivers don't know about it... Come to think of it, they're probably right," he went on gloomily, thinking. "There are no animals down in this valley. The cliff and waterfall stops them. They'd be down here and wipe these folks out like a shot otherwise."

"We might try walking round Rhea," Eda ruminated.

"Sorry, bright eyes, I don't feel up to walking a couple of thousand miles without shoes on..." Mart glanced at his

watch. "The ship's due to leave in about ten minutes," he groaned. "Once that happens we're here for keeps probably—"

"There's that smell again," Eda whistled, clamping down on her nose. "Seems like the wind's off the gas-works this morning."

"Do you think if we shouted— ?" Emmot began, eyes glistening with unexpected discovery—but Mart waved a hand at him.

"What do you think we are—yodelers?"

He stalked impatiently to the door of the place and stared moodily out over the little clearing towards the river, across at the sullenly smoking volcano. The odor was disgustingly strong... Eda came quietly to his side.

"I'm sorry, Mart," she murmured, and without turning, he grunted absently:

"Sorry? What about?"

"Well, I seemed kind of silly making cracks when this situation's so desperate. I—" She stopped suddenly and twisted her head sharply. Mart glanced at her and she raised a quick finger for silence.

"Listen!" she breathed. "Our funeral guns!"

He caught her meaning immediately. On the odorous wind came the distinct roaring boof of rocket blasts—the rockets of the distant liner as it lifted from Rhea into the void. Right on time, too.

"Well," Mart growled, "they aren't losing any sleep over us, that's evident." He stared forlornly at the purply sky. "Just the same, you'd think since we left our names with the purser that they'd—"

"Mart, the sound's coming nearer!" Eda shouted suddenly, in quick delight.

"Listen! It isn't fading away into space—There!" she screamed, jabbing out her arm. "There, near the waterfall! The ship! They're looking for us!"

She was right. Not a thousand feet above the waterfall and jungle swept the titanic bulk of the space liner, underjets and foam nozzles working vigorously. Here and there dull red ashy deposit missed the foam nozzles and sizzled in the river...

Then the ship began to circle as slowly as its huge, ponderous bulk would permit. There were dimly visible figures standing in the airlock, gazing down.

MART came to himself abruptly and raced wildly into the center of the clearing in huge, stumbling leaps. Eda joined him in frantic arm-waving. Emmot and Walbrook came out of the building too and began an insane war dance in the lesser gravity, a dance entirely inappropriate to their station.

After a while, Rawl and his people came as well and copied the Earthlings' example because it amused them. Linking hands they danced around like a circle of elves and fairies, chanting that damnable craze song, "I'll Buy Me a Robot . . . "

"Hey!" screamed Mart frantically, as the ship moved towards the smoking volcano. "Hey! Come back here! Can't you see us? Hey!" He cupped his hands and bawled his lungs hoarse.

A stream of red, glowing deposits crawled up the volcano side as the liner swept over it. Something was wrong somewhere; that foam nozzle wasn't dead true — then suddenly it seemed that the entire crazy moon went out in a flash of blindingly brilliant light and sound.

Mart and Eda found themselves flung backwards by the force of a terrific explosion, flung clean on top of the wildly struggling Emmot and Walbrook. Every one of the Rheans fell to the ground, holding their ears in anguish, their higher hearing power wrenched and hammered by the frightful concussion.

"Look!" Eda screamed, scrambling up. "An —an eruption!"

"It can't be — " Mart began, clutching hold of her; then he broke off in astounded horror at the vision of the giant liner reeling violently as it recovered from the shock of that explosion.

It was heading swiftly away now from a sudden newly born rift in the volcano side through which was spouting a hellish fury of cinders, pumice, poisonous fumes and bubbling lava.

"I get it!" Mart cried. "That sulphuric gas must have been ignited somewhere by that underjet deposit. The nozzle's wrong; must be the one they've repaired. The sparks blew out a blind cone or blister when the gas ignited, started an uprush of matter . . . "

He stopped, gasping, staring through the swirling, darkening smoke clouds at the lurching space liner. It could not land in the clearing in any case; it was far too huge.

"Ahoy!" he bawled, and an amplified voice thundered out over the din of escaping volcanic steam.

"You have been seen. Prepare for rope ladder escape."

"Make it snappy!" Mart howled, jumping back as a lump of hot lava spattered onto his hand and stung viciously.

"This — this is all most disturbing," panted Walbrook, coming up through the smoke. "What do we do with the rope ladder? Hang onto it?"

"Or else fry," Mart answered him briefly. He swung round, struck with a sudden thought, stared in pitying amazement at the Rheans. Every one of them was lying on the already smouldering vegetation, gasping desperately, twisting and turning.

"Rawl, what's the matter?" he panted, lifting the head of the queer, bearded little ruler.

The strange creature tried to smile, choked over his words.

"Pa-parting is such sweet s-sorrow . . ." he whispered. "Undertaking estimates g-given. Write for — for my prospectus." That was all he said, quivered and smiled over it, then relaxed.

"Dead," Mart said very quietly.

"Poor, strange people," Eda whispered her eyes moist. "The noise?"

"Must have been," Mart muttered. "It nearly deafened us. To these creatures it must have been brain-destroying. Perhaps it's as well. What with the volcano and that faulty underjet on the ship the whole darned moon will be ablaze in an hour . . ." He stared around pityingly, through the smoke, on the sprawled, child-like figures. Then he looked up at a yell from Emmot.

"The rope ladder! Come on!"

He tore towards it in frantic leaps as it hung like a runged snake from the twilit gloom. Then he was pulled up short as Mart seized him savagely by the shoulder.

"Lay off, can't you? Eda first! Up you get . . ."

He swung the girl upwards. She gripped the rungs and began to climb. Emmot followed, and after him came the panting and thoroughly frightened judge.

MART came last, felt the ladder swinging him away from that fated clearing towards the clearer air. He could not take his eyes from that group of silent beings near their doomed, toy city.

"Pretenders, playing at life," he muttered, "only to meet death through the damnable blunderings of Earthlings. God, it's like mowing down children with ray guns — "

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"Hey!" came Eda's voice from above him, and he looked up to see she'd reached the airlock.

"Better come up," she called. "You might find it cold out there when we head off into space..."

The smoke of the eruption hid the dead Pretenders from sight as Mart began to climb...

THE END